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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 004236

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR ROSS' MEETING WITH ISLAMISTS: A GOOD  
OPENING

Classified By: CDA GREGORY L. BERRY FOR REASONS 1.5(B) AND (D).

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) On July 17, R Special Coordinator Ambassador Ross met with Islamic Action Front (IAF) leaders Sheikh Hamza Mansour (IAF Secretary General), Abdel Latif Arabiyat (IAF Shura Council President), and Jamil Abu Bakr (IAF First Deputy Secretary General). Poloff accompanied Ambassador Ross. IAF

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leaders welcomed Ross warmly even as they sharply criticized U.S. policy. The July 17 IAF meeting marked another significant step in the restoration of contacts between the Embassy and the IAF since they were disrupted two years ago by visa issues involving prominent Muslim leaders. End summary.

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MORE DIALOGUE NECESSARY  
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2. (C) Poloff opened the July 17 meeting by acknowledging the IAF's willingness to engage in dialogue, and noting that this willingness had been a factor leading to the meeting with Ambassador Ross. Ambassador Ross expressed the Administration's respect for Islam and stated the U.S.'s interest in continued dialogue with Islamist figures who eschew violence and terror. Ambassador Ross said the U.S. had traditionally underestimated the importance of dialogue with the Arab world in general and with the Islamist current in particular, and asked IAF leaders for their views regarding "the feelings of the Arab people regarding the situation" and "the role of the U.S." He also noted, critically, that Muslims had allowed the September 11 perpetrators to present themselves as if they were acting in the name of Islam.

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ROSS' VISIT "MAY BE A GOOD START"  
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3. (C) As expected, Ambassador Ross' affirmation of the need for continued dialogue provoked sharp responses from IAF leaders:

- Arabiyat welcomed Ambassador Ross' "positive outlook" and said "Muslims condemned the acts of September 11." However, Arabiyat believes answers to questions about who perpetrated the September 11 attacks can be answered by looking at who benefited from the attacks (i.e., Zionists). Muslims have gained nothing while Zionists have gained the loyalties of 45 million Americans, presumably including many conservative Christians, who are "now mobilized . . . to serve Israel under the pretext that Christ will return when Greater Israel comes to exist." Arabiyat also complained about what he views as a bias against Muslims dating back to Nixon, and a media warp that distorts American opinion in favor of Israel. Perhaps because of this, Arabiyat said, America perilously places "all its capabilities at the disposal of the Zionist project" regardless of divergence between U.S. and Israeli interests.

- Turning more towards regional issues, Arabiyat claimed that what little was built through the Oslo accords (opposed by Islamists at the time of their signing) has been destroyed by U.S. support for Sharon "the war criminal," whom the U.S. calls "a man of peace." Regarding Iraq, Arabiyat criticized U.S. policy for supporting "a deadly siege" in Iraq on grounds that Iraqis have weapons of mass destruction, yet failing to "ask similar questions about the Jewish weapons of mass destruction." In answering Ambassador Ross' question as to why the Muslim masses had allowed persons like Bin Laden to speak in their name, Arabiyat said the street "applauded the acts of Bin Laden as an expression of their frustration with U.S. policy, particularly in Iraq and Palestine." At the end of all this, Arabiyat optimistically concluded that Ambassador Ross' visit "may be a good start."

- Mansour began by focusing closely on Ambassador Ross' statement that America had not done enough to promote dialogue with Islamists. According to Mansour, "things may be well" if this is an Administration view and not just a

personal view held by Ambassador Ross. Mansour then cited Qur'anic verses which, he said, show the September 11 "attacks on non-Muslims (were) equally an attack on Islam" and provide the basis for "our condemnation" of them. But Mansour blamed September 11 on the pro-Israeli bias of the "U.S. Administration" and, most notably of all, its support of Sharon. "Over and above (giving Sharon the money and weapons to kill Palestinians), you picked this man, who is accused by the ground on which he walks and describe him as a man of peace." As an aside, Mansour also complained that it is not up to the U.S. to decide that Arafat and Saddam Hussein should be replaced, though he and his colleagues do not support either leader.

- Next, Mansour focused on the realm of public diplomacy, by addressing what he termed the "U.S. failure in persuading Arabs and Muslims that Islam is not (the Americans') target."

Again, Mansour laid the blame squarely on U.S. policy. "You," he said, "are capable of occupying the whole world, but you will not win our hearts except through justice. We may be weak and poor, but we have rights and are willing to make sacrifices to defend them." Mansour said he fears the day when Arab anger boils over to the point that it "becomes directed against all things American or Western" and people widely say "Bin Laden is the solution." Mansour believes that the U.S. now stands at a historical moment, and concluded by expressing hope that he had "presented a correct picture" of the dire situation to Ambassador Ross.

- Mansour and Arabiyat both expressed anger and skepticism concerning President Bush's June 24 speech. They remain unmoved by President Bush's references to Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and eventual creation of a Palestinian state, which they juxtapose against past delays in reaching both goals and America's recent "unleash(ing of) the criminal Sharon, the man of massacres" with carte blanche authority "to kill people, to kill women and children, (and) to change the (Palestinian) leadership." According to the IAF leaders, the street has no faith in President Bush's vision because its immediate effect is to provide Sharon with political cover without giving anything palpable to Palestinians.

- Abu Bakr predicted that moderate influences within Islam and the Arab World will continue to weaken as long as the U.S. supports Israel at the expense of the Arab rights. Trends towards extremism will gather strength so long as U.S. policy remains unjust and Arabic regimes remain illegitimate.

Picking up on the legitimacy point, Mansour added that America must "respect the peoples' choice" in Jordan (i.e., by supporting parliamentary elections, in which many expect Islamists to do well). He criticized the lack of a sitting Parliament and the GOJ's repeated delays in holding new elections, saying he "knew" America had hypocritically "blessed" this.

14. (C) Ambassador Ross responded generally by noting the Administration's realization that there exists a principled Islamic world with which it should engage positively. He further emphasized our common desires for peace and justice for all mankind. The disagreement, as Ambassador Ross put it, is over "the means to get there." Ambassador Ross expressed hope in finding a way "to interact positively with the real Muslim ummah" on the goal of achieving peace and justice, and concluded by acknowledging that we jointly have "hard issues to work on." Arabiyat applauded Ambassador Ross' remarks and expressed gratitude for his visit, saying that he and his colleagues had been "looking for such an opening and for this line of thinking."

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PRESS COVERAGE OF THE MEETING  
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15. (C) Several Jordanian newspapers have published articles about Ambassador Ross' meeting with Islamists. The sensationalist weekly "Shihan" went so far as to assert that the meeting took place "behind the Government's back," and that it surprised local politicians given "the mounting U.S. campaign against Arab and Islamic countries under the excuse of combating terrorism." Shihan also reported that Ambassador Ross' meeting is part of a regional USG effort to "obtain information from Islamic communities . . . so as to develop means of confronting Islamic movements." The Islamist weekly Assabeel has not covered the meeting at all, even though articles like the one in Shihan may be calculated to rouse the ire of more extreme Islamist elements opposed to engagement with the U.S.

16. (C) For his part, Sheikh Mansour has adopted a firm and unapologetic tone in answering press questions about the meeting. When asked by Shihan, for example, if he feared news of the meeting might infuriate the Islamist rank and file, Mansour responded: "We were not in an entertainment session. We conveyed the message, which the Americans should hear. One of our party's aims is to express our stands." Asked if there would be other meetings with Americans, Mansour replied that he would have no reservations if "there

was an interest" in meeting and that "each case (involving the possibility of a meeting) will be studied at its appropriate time."

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) Ambassador Ross' meeting with "moderate" leaders of the IAF and Muslim Brotherhood was the most significant and high-level USG contact with Islamists in Jordan in more than two years. While the bulk of the meeting focused on criticisms of U.S. policy, Ambassador Ross offered the goal of achieving peace and justice as a conceptual "opening" on which future dialogue can build. We anticipate that future contacts will reveal more about the IAF's operations and agenda in Jordan. End comment.

18. (U) This message was cleared by Ambassador Ross.  
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